

How It Looks to a Sponsor Notes on some mischances -- and some rewards -- along the sponsorship trail

FIRST off let's distinguish between sponsorship and many other functions and attitudes that are often loosely called sponsorship. The first contact a new member has is the message carrier. If this is an AA member rather than the written word or an outside referral, the carrier may or may not become a sponsor. After listening, talking enough to establish his identification as an alcoholic, taking the prospect to some meetings, I believe the messenger has a responsibility to inform the "new man" (when he's sober enough to hear) that he should choose his own sponsor. That so frequently the initial contact does, in fact, become a sponsor is either a minor miracle or attests to our innate immature tendency to hero worship (dangerous to both sponsor and sponsoree).

Then there is the baby-sitting bit. After the bars close and the participating drunk no longer has a hired ear, he'll often remember from some prior contact with AA that here "they're supposed to listen to me." If you have the time and inclination for this sort of thing, more power to you. No doubt it's humane and occasionally even productive. Under baby-sitting, too, I classify the call from the mate who has to go to work and "poor Charlie is nervous. Won't you come over?" This bit is frequently worthwhile but I don't think it's sponsorship.

Then there is the taxi routine. How often we load up the car with good folks who need a ride -- good for all of us and no special problem. But then there's the joker who lives on the other side of town, declines to make friends with near neighbors in AA, wants to get out of putting the kids to bed, and won't leave off berating his mother-in-law long enough to talk AA. This one I can do without with a good conscience after three or four tries. It took a few years to get this callous, but I'm comfortable about it now.

Enough of what is not sponsorship -- let's get to the subject.

When the new member is dried out enough to see beyond his immediate disabling illness, he finds he's fallen in with many diverse personalities. He'll be attracted to some more than others, naturally. He's about ready to choose his first sponsor. Chances are that the appearance of stability, serenity, personal organization, and that ephemeral thing called "strength" will influence his choice at this stage. However, as his growth progresses, he may need to add other sponsors. Perhaps his need for a companion in spiritual growth is not met by Number One. I suggest he take on another whose qualities of spirituality attract him--the same may be true in the phases of AA philosophy, ordinary sociability and AA service. Do you begin to see why I think it's a miracle if any one person matches another's needs? Then too, let's face it, not infrequently the sponsoree has the ability to grow much faster than his initial sponsor. In this situation, moving on is highly desirable.

And what does a good sponsor do? Primarily listen--objectively if possible. Wise counselors rarely lay down the word, but rather allow one to ventilate his thinking and arrive at his own conclusions.

Second in importance is probably example. This is a tough lick since all of us have ebb and flow in our own emotional life. Rather than trying for an impossibly high plane of performance, there may be greater value in allowing a sponsoree to see that the sponsor, too, has rough days which have nothing to do with taking a drink.

In AA's current development, it must fall in the province of the enlightened sponsor to get the service message across. An attitude of gratitude practically guarantees sobriety, but demonstrating gratitude is pretty foreign to our natures by the time we're ready for AA. Most groups have a hard core of old-timers who resist any mention of service, money, organizational chores, or the many other things that AA, as a growing entity, must face realistically. So often, the newcomer is denied the privilege of hearing, at meetings, how he may help in the larger field. These reactionaries stifle such information with the well-known "let's get back to AA" hue and cry. Since they are frequently respected older members who are diligent in their personal AA work, their opinion carries considerable weight. Another responsibility of a sponsor, particularly of the fairly new member, I think, is to encourage the new man to try a few decisions for himself. Too great a dependence can blight both parties.

Sponsorship is a never-ending need for most of us. In spite of a dozen years of sobriety in the Fellowship I've found I gain strength -- and God knows I need it -- in an effort to reinforce another member in times of stress.

The interpersonal relationship of sponsor and sponsoree can be greatly rewarding but never static. We sometimes miss, but the growth is all in the trying.

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